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LETTERS TO FRANCES.

BY MARCEL PRÉVOST.

Translated by W. OSBORNE BRIGSTOCKE.

(Continued from page 365.)

LETTER IV.

The winter novelties—What Lucy thinks of "men"—Frances interested in dress—The two kinds of coquetry—The craze for luxury—Trials of those who wear gorgeous imitations—The praiseworthy coquetry.

DEAR FRANCES—Amongst the letters I have just received is one with the address written in a clear, pointed handwriting that told me before I opened it who the sender was.

"Dear Uncle,

"I did so enjoy that afternoon when you went shopping with me. I enjoyed it really much more than when I go with mother, for I know it bores her. You couldn't have been more amiable or more patient; but—and this has only just dawned upon me—I must have wasted a lot of your time. If I did, do write and scold

"Your

"FRANCES."

Don't worry, dear child, it never occurred to me to think that I had wasted that afternoon when your mother, too tired herself to go shopping, asked me to go with you in her stead.

Shopping seems to mean, in your girl's language, going only to shops which show and sell dresses, millinery or anything wearable. I gather that when another season is at hand, this inspection of the new fashions cannot be evaded by any self-respecting person, even if still a pupil at Berquin College. Not being obliged to wear any prescribed kind of dress at school—"dark shades without too much ornament," is, I understand, the only restriction—you tax your ingenuity in order to interpret the rule right liberally; and you dream all the week of how to seem well dressed when next you go home for the day. The energy with which you pursue this aim is surprising. You once confessed to me that your great ambition is to be very, very well dressed, and that your school friends are nearly all of the same mind. Some of them

are rich and can afford to go to the best shops. The rest—the majority—try to atone for their limited means by unlimited ingenuity: amongst them, your friend Lucy Despeyroux (whose brother is that good-looking St. Cyr cadet) and yourself.

Lucy has a theory which she was good enough to explain in detail one day in my presence. She was not addressing me in particular; in fact, I think that in the heat of the discussion she must have forgotten I was there. This fascinating little friend of yours, who is now—how old?—seventeen, isn't it? happened, I remember, to be wearing a dark blue serge dress that day: it showed off her beautiful figure to advantage. She was saying: "My dear, if you haven't got £1000 a year pin money you must be content to do with tailor-made dresses and blouses; besides, you know, men like nothing better than tailor-made dresses."

I have often met Lucy at your house and you have told me enough about her to convince me that her decided, dictatorial tone is altogether due to her perfect and charming innocence. It's delightful to hear your friend criticise the world, life and what she calls "men." By "men" she means nothing more than that wonderful cadet, her brother, Maxime Despeyroux, who sometimes pays sensational visits to Berquin College. Judging by what Lucy said, I came to the conclusion that Maxime liked nothing better than tailor-made dresses. The next speaker was yourself, Frances: after having meditated a minute or two, you made this profound remark:

"But the only tailor-made dresses I should really love to have are awfully expensive. Oh, if only we could have enough money to buy everything we want!"

"Frances!" . . . the interruption came from the half-smiling, half-frowning Madame le Quellien.

You blushed: you put on that look which makes you look so quaint—chin forward and lips tight shut—and the subject was dropped.

To be serious for a moment; Madame le Quellien is uneasy about your incipient love of dress. I try to reassure her as best I can; but, I must say that I have come to the conclusion that you spend a great deal of time thinking of your personal appearance. I know that does not prevent your

having a taste and time for more important matters, for books and art, nor does it say that you are not, at heart, a sensible, good girl. But that afternoon I spent with you, whilst you were gleaning information about the fashions for next winter, was most instructive to me and threw much light upon this matter.

In the first place I discovered that you knew the names and addresses of all the chief Paris dressmakers and milliners. I noted with tacit admiration the free and easy way in which you went into the shops, had all the novelties shown you, and then made good your escape without taking anything at all, except a mental photograph of the coveted object, which you got for nothing. I watched the bright gleam of pleasure in your eyes when they showed you "a work of art" (if indeed there is such a thing amongst those kickshaws). Alas! my Frances—I feel bound to emphasise this sad truth—in spite of the precious gifts God has given to you, you are clearly liable to become either a flashy doll of luxury, if ever you are rich, or else one of those women who fiercely kick against their mediocrity because others can afford to buy what they covet. That's why our afternoon's shopping left a shadow of anxiety in my mind—one which I feel obliged to tell you of. If in so doing I offend you, remember how amiable I was that afternoon, and forgive me.

Have you ever noticed that the word "coquetry" has two meanings, just as the thing itself has, so to speak, two degrees? One woman is a coquette because she thinks of her own good looks, is fond of making the most of what nature has given her. Another woman is a coquette because she desires and seeks the homage of men—of as many as possible. . . . You object? You say "I don't care a bit for 'attentions' and I hate 'being taken notice of.'" Quite true, I have noticed that you are a coquette for the former reason.

Foolish, humdrum compliments annoy you. The admiration of men, if too marked, makes you uneasy and displeases you. But are you quite certain that you will never go from the harmless taste for dress to the dangerous love of show? which is the way of the world. That wish to be well dressed may very well, at present, have but one cause, namely the pleasure which you yourself feel at seeing yourself in the glass. But

don't you realise that this portion of your life is a period of transition, "a few bars," to no purpose, as you say? You like to look nice, because it gives you confidence for the future. A little voice (which you pretend not to hear, probably) whispers in your ear "When I choose to . . ."

Do you not make too much of your unwillingness to receive compliments of men, and of your distaste for flirtation?

Women are only too ready to consider virtue that which in fact is nothing but timidity—of course, only in their own cases. "But I am not shy" you'll say. Just so. And that is just why I am anxious. Your shyness in the presence of attentive young men is really only a fault that comes from habit and is the result of a bringing up at home which has been ideally simple. I should say that three months in society would evaporate all that. And then, Miss Frances' coquetry would increase proportionately—and how be sure that the step leading from the first kind to the second would never be taken? . . .

You protest? granted that you will keep to the egotistical coquetry, you will dress only for yourself, merely to have the pleasure of seeing yourself beautiful and elegant in the looking-glass. On the other hand, you will not be able to avoid meeting many women in society who are coquettes for the one reason or the other. Will you never feel inclined to rival with them for the first place in elegance?

In Paris, to-day, this rivalry of dress borders on the extreme of madness, and no one knows when the limit will be reached, for the record-craze is mixed up in it. Lawsuits, dressmaker *v.* client, have revealed to us the silk muslin gown which costs 900 francs and can only be worn once. Everyone in Paris knows the name of the fashionable lady (a very charming lady she is) who has at least one new dress a day. I spent a fortnight this year at a fashionable sea-side place: one of the fascinations of the beach for idlers was to gaze at the dresses of a certain charming person, one of the most distinguished of the cosmopolitan set. She wore them for one day; and what dresses! One felt bound to have a good look at each for it would never be seen again, nor the hat which completed the picture. Quite an entertaining sight for the men in flannels or in smoking jackets, but a terrible

spectacle to any of the fair sex who were on the parade. Once a woman has this craving for dress, she must be the best-dressed woman, or all her efforts seem absolutely vain. The bodice, which she so fondly coaxed into shape in her dressing-room, begins to burn her shoulders the moment another woman appears wearing a better one. . . . My Frances, think what agony such a woman is preparing for herself if her fortune is not limitless, if her caprice is certain to come to the end of her means very soon, if she continues to have a craving to join this struggle for the pre-eminence in luxury.

I have seen such women and I still know several. They are pathetic, heart-breaking sights. Of course, all of them are acquainted with a head woman at Virot's who betrays to them professional secrets and lets them have for 30 francs models that cost 200. They have all discovered the little dressmaker, as clever as a fairy, who has refused a position at Dœuillet's and yet makes dresses for three pounds (probably philanthropic motives). They all curtail the expenses of the table, of the servants, even of the children, to meet their clothes bills, which mount up in spite of all the care, in spite of all the time spent making at home the pelisses and the sequin trimmings, not to speak of the hand-painting on the stuffs. And when the great day or the grand night is come, when this elaborate dress appears at some function amidst scores of others, she who wears it is suddenly agonised. She has looked around; she has compared; she has formed an estimate of herself. The real hat from Virot, the real dress from Dœuillet, are there, before her eyes, worn by another woman. And the mere sight of them is enough to make the unfortunate woman imagine that her hat, her dress, clearly betray to any experienced eye (and what feminine eye is not adept in such matters) not only the careful imitating but also the economy in extravagance, that is to say something more despicable than indigence!

That can by no means prevent the poor woman from beginning afresh, from exposing herself to new tortures, new disappointments. It is a struggle which soon wears away all goodness from the heart. The triumph of the honest, with which the novelist usually winds up such careers, does not always take place. At any rate such a life is both tragic and

despicable. Passionately fond of dress and yet honest at heart! What a subject for the novel of a psychologist. I cannot think of any author who has written about it yet; real life treats of it every day.

I can imagine your scrunching this letter and I can hear you saying "That's too bad; he's unjust, the wretch! How can he think that I could be like those women!" No, Frances, I don't think that. I know that your character is sufficiently well-balanced to enable you to avoid all such excess. I only want to spare you a painful experience, to cure you at once of a slight tendency which has been growing little by little. At present, you have a spontaneous coquetry which is harmless and full of fun, and I myself became a party to it the other day. But what about to-morrow—in society—throughout the course of your life? And yet one must know whither one's road leads, and, as the philosopher said, will one's will. What's the use of ever taking up a load that is sure subsequently to become an awkward impediment and difficult to put down again?

"Alright, Uncle. I'll try not to be a coquette any more."

Indeed, beware of it, dear child. To-day I have only spoken to you of two kinds of coquetry—the hurtful kind which will never be yours, and the harmless kind, which is yours, to-day innocent indeed, but to-morrow perhaps dangerous. There is yet a third kind. Yes, Frances, there is the right kind of coquetry, the useful kind, the praiseworthy coquetry. The best proof is that one of the worst things for a woman to have said of her is "She does not care how she dresses." Men (to use your friend Lucy's expression) don't care for girls of whom that is said; go and ask that handsome cadet who knows so much about tailor-made dresses.

It is well to avoid that reputation of excessive virtue, and to do so it is necessary to be a coquette, to a certain extent. Perhaps you can guess what I mean; I will speak of it in detail in my next letter. . . . And, as the most intricate problems of the day are not too much for your active little brain, we will endeavour, in that same letter, to foretell the evolution of feminine coquetry during the century that is commencing.